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6 June 1968

Re : The Visit of the Soviet Whaling Fleet to Sidney, Australia, May 1968
source: Two local residents of Ukrainian descent who took part in conversation

From May 20 to May 27, 1968 a Russian whaling fleet, consisting of twenty whalers and a flag-ship, docked at Sidney, Australia in order to replenish its supplies. This was the fleet's first stop since leaving Vladivostok in September of 1967 to hunt whales in southern hemisphere waters.

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The flag-ship, the "Sovietska Rosiya", is one of the largest commercial vessels in the world. Actually it is a floating factory 741 feet long and with a tonnage of 44,000, which is manned by 500 sailors and workers and equipped to process the meat, blubber, and other products of 65 whales per day. After 8 months at sea, the "Sovietska Rosiya" was carrying back 60,000 tons of meat, blubber, and other products to Vladivostok. Each of the 20 whalers carries 30 to 32 men.

The large Russian whaling fleet was warmly welcomed in Sidney. The "Sovietska Rosiya" was assigned one of the best piers in the port - one usually reserved for large passenger-carrying ocean liners. The smaller vessels were docked at several different locations among the other commercial vessels in the Sidney harbor at the time.

During the time that the Russian fleet was in port, an American vessel, the "Arlington", brought 800 American soldiers on leave from Vietnam to Sidney. Local newspapers reported that although ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ there were no official restrictions on meetings between the two crews, the 1200 Russians and 800 Americans showed little interest in each other.

Visiting was permitted on all Russian vessels. More than 60,000 persons ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ inspected the "Sovietska Rosiya". The crew was at all times friendly, often inviting visitors into their cabins where they treated them to vodka, caviar, Russian cigars and chocolates.

The majority of the crew were aged between 28 and 40. But there were also a number of younger men between the ages of 20 and 25. Most were married. They were free to go anywhere they chose in groups of 3 - 6 men until 5 p.m. each day. In the

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evenings they were taken to various activities in larger groups. Many were allowed to visit private homes in the city, although there were occasions when pre-arranged private parties had to be cancelled because at the last minute invited crew members gave work duties as their excuse for not being able to attend. But on the whole, unlike other Russian crews visiting Sidney even as recently as 5 or 10 years ago, this one seemed eager to meet and speak with the residents of Sydney on almost any topic.

From different conversations with a number of crew members, our reporters discovered that each sailor and worker in the whaling fleet had been given approximately 200 Australian dollars for expenses while in Sidney. (This is approximately the average sum earned by an Australian worker.) The crew were given the money in rubles which was then exchanged for dollars before the fleet docked in Sidney. However, although the official rate of exchange is one ruble to one Australian dollar, the crew were given only one dollar for every ten rubles. This rate of exchange was explained to the crew members by their officers by the fact that Soviet rubles as international currency are guaranteed by gold and therefore their price falls ten-fold in Australia. Thus in exchange for 2000 rubles, each man received 200 Australian dollars. Small wonder then that Sydney newspapers reported that the Russians were not doing much shopping and giving as their reason for this the argument that everything was much more expensive in Australia than in the Soviet Union. A pair of 12 dollar shoes, which in the Soviet Union would cost 25 - 30 rubles, obviously seemed extremely expensive to the crew members. According to the rate of exchange set up by the Russian authorities on board ship, the 12 dollar shoes in reality cost 120 rubles. When told of the official rate of ~~xxxxx~~ exchange on dollars and rubles, many of the crew members realized that they had been misled about the true conditions in Australia and prevented from buying commodities which they might otherwise have bought.

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About 30% of the whaling fleet crew were Ukrainians who live in Vladivostok. These Ukrainian sailors and workers freely met and spoke with Ukrainian emigres who now reside in Australia. They appeared interested in the life of their fellow countrymen and even unconstrained when speaking of political issues.

In conversations with many Ukrainian crew members, our reporters were told that some of these Ukrainians, especially the younger men, had been born outside of Ukraine, but the majority of them had moved to Vladivostok from Ukraine and periodical visit their families in Ukraine. Some of them spoke Ukrainian very well, some spoke a combination of Ukrainian and Russian, and some spoke only Russian but when asked their nationality, considered themselves Ukrainian.

Although the Russians in particular and all the younger members of the crew in general were the most unconstrained when it came to discussions of life in the Soviet Union, there was a noticeable lack of fear in most conversations. Even when in groups, they spoke of a ~~the~~ slow process of democratization taking place in the Soviet Union and expressed their hopes that it would reach at least the same stage as in Czechoslovakia. Some openly stated that there should be a second political party in the Soviet Union. They were optimistic about greater democratization of Soviet society, arguing that once Khruschev had "opened a window toward Europe", he opened the way for liberalization. Of course, there were also those who said that although Stalin had been a sadist, he had maintained order.

The general impression that these visiting crew members formed of life in Australia as was apparent from their conversations was that "life is pretty good here". This seemed to shake their belief in official Soviet propaganda about life in capitalist countries in general.

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